When did you start writing, and what influenced you to write _A Better Place to Live_?

I want to honour those of my parents’ generation who transformed a frontier province, built up the infrastructure and created the opportunities Top Enders enjoy today. Out of the ruins left by 64 WW2 bombing raids, by the end of the 1960s Darwin was the fastest-growing city in Australia.

My family came to Darwin in 1945. My father Harry Giese is the descendant of a German family who migrated to Australia in the 1870s. He was to serve the NT Administration until 1973 in roles at the centre of government policy, initiating many welfare reforms. In 1978, he became the Territory’s first Ombudsman, and later instrumental in setting up the Menzies School of Health Research, now a world leader in Indigenous and tropical health. My mother Nancy is a descendant of a German family who migrated to Australia in the 1870s. He was to serve the NT Administration until 1973 in roles at the centre of government policy, initiating many welfare reforms. In 1978, he became the Territory’s first Ombudsman, and later instrumental in setting up the Menzies School of Health Research, now a world leader in Indigenous and tropical health. My mother Nancy is a pioneer in education and the arts, was elected Chancellor of the Northern Territory University ten times, and was one of those who worked successfully for a museum and art gallery and a performing arts centre for Darwin. Both my parents experienced the full force of Cyclone Tracy and stayed on afterwards to help rebuild the shattered city.

One of my father’s first tasks as Director of Welfare was to offer loans of 300,000 pounds for 60 years at 1 per cent interest so that community organisations for service, sports, recreation and youth could set up places for people to meet. There was no local government, no local representation at the time. “Gradually”, he said, “people were beginning to see their role as citizens in a rapidly evolving community operated and managed by the community itself.”

Much of your previous writing has been about Chinese immigrants in Australia. Do you think Darwin has been ahead of the curve in making multiculturalism work in Australia?

Through my oral history work with the National Library of Australia and my collaborations with the enterprising Chung Wah Society, I’ve talked to many Chinese Australians country-wide. They have been here in Darwin from the very beginning, returning after World War II and Tracy to rebuild their lives and the city. Darwin has always welcomed people from a whole variety of backgrounds. My book begins with a snapshot of the big ‘mixed’ families whose fathers and grandfathers came here to work in pearlaring and mining and intermarried with indigenous people, famous families such as the Ahmats, Angeles, Cardonas, Cubillos, Hazeldanes, Muirs and Roes. Together with the Chinese merchants, they were the backbone of the town.

The first Director of the Museum and Art Gallery, Colin Jack-Hinton, said: “One of the things that’s always attracted me to the Northern Territory is the fact that it is an amalgam of people from a whole variety of backgrounds, who do not lose their backgrounds, who do not lose their cultures, who can survive with them, and integrate, within the Northern Territory...a situation of tolerance.”

What is it about Darwin do you believe keeps bringing people back, even after total devastation?

This sense of being Territorians, able to work together to make something of their lives in a society where family, faith, voluntary association and culture flourish.

All are welcome to come along to the NT Library, Parliament House on Thursday June 4 at 6pm for the launch of “A Better Place to Live”. An exhibition of photos of Darwin from the 1950’s-60’s will also be open.